

No To US-demanded Crack-down on Free Media

The following article is from "Ali Abunimah's bitter pill: uncovering media myths about the middle east" reacting to attempts by the U.S. State Department to influence news and its distribution in the Middle East.

Ali Abunimah

There can be no more shocking and disgusting demonstration of US double standards than the demand delivered by US Secretary of State Colin Powell that Qatar crack down on the independent satellite TV network Al-Jazira.

According to the BBC, Powell asked Qatar to rein in the influential and editorially independent television station, which gives airtime to anti-American opinions among many others. The emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Khalifa al-Thani, confirmed after a meeting with Powell in Washington that he had been asked to exert influence on the Qatari-based channel, which can be received almost worldwide.

Al-Jazira is one of the few sources of reliable and comprehensive news reporting and debate about the Arab and wider worlds.

As someone who watches Al-Jazira daily, I can say that there is nothing on this network that matches the shameless nationalism, open hostility to Arabs and Muslims and occasionally outright incitement that often passes for "news" and "analysis" in the United States media, both electronic and print not to mention the "entertainment industry."

How would the United States government react if Arab countries demanded it crack down on the semi-official daily The Washington Post which in August published a series of articles demanding that Israel launch a war of annihilation against the Palestinians? Or would the US government be prepared to crack down on CNN which for hours after the September 11 atrocity repeatedly played a clip of a small handful of celebrating Palestinians inviting viewers to take that as indication that Palestinians were either responsible or universally pleased with the attack? Or how

about the major US TV networks which rely for most of their analysis on former government and military officials who are often hostile to Palestinians, Iraqis and others?

I hope the United States government would never crack down on any media, and that no government will heed hypocritical demands to do the same. Here in the US, where what passes for television news is largely nothing more than advertisements, diet tips, mawkish sentiment and attempts to give every story a selfish personal or financial angle for every viewer, independent news beamed in from the outside world has never been more vital. Here, where no person is permitted to speak on any issue for more than eight seconds at a time, the kind of free, in-depth debate provided by Al-Jazira should serve as an example and a reminder to the American media as to what their job is supposed to be. Is it this very freedom that the United States government hates and wants to destroy even as it accuses others of wanting to destroy the freedoms we enjoy here in America?

The greatest service Al-Jazira could do is to continue its mission undaunted by these unconscionable demands, and to start broadcasting in English so that Americans too can begin to comprehend at long last some of the issues and problems their government has mired them in.

The United States is justified in seeking the cooperation of every country to track down the perpetrators of the September 11 atrocities and bring them to justice. But stifling the freedoms of others in the name of protecting your own is a formula that the US has tried before. It didn't work then and it will not work now.

(Note: I have sent a letter based on the above commentary to Powell at secretary@state.gov)

The original article can be found at:
<http://www.abunimah.org>

Related links

Attempts to influence flow of news in the Middle East are also the subject of reports by the International Press Institute and the International Freedom of Expression Exchange:
<http://www.ifex.org/alerts/view.html?id=9526>.

Censorship and propaganda from the Gulf War to Today, from Democracy Now! September 24, 2002.

"I would say that the greatest threat to democracy right now in the United States is George Bush's casual use of propaganda, and sometimes lies, to advance his case against Iraq," Harper's publisher Rick MacArthur told Democracy Now's Amy Goodman. MacArthur is also author of "The Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War." Goodman asked MacArthur to revisit the elder Bush White House's control of the press corps during that administration's Persian Gulf War. Journalists then faced strict Pentagon control, including no freedom of movement and PR escorts at all times. According to MacArthur, major media did not protest the restrictions and many of the players from twelve years ago are still in the picture, including Dick Cheney and Colin Powell. Major media also failed to challenge a Hill & Knowlton -run PR campaign for the astroturf organisation Citizens for a Free Kuwait. The campaign is most remembered for promoting the fake story about Iraqi soldiers taking Kuwaiti babies out of incubators.

See here also

The war on journalism, by Paul McMasters of the First Amendment Center, The Freedom Forum, October 26 2001, looks at the restriction of media coverage and its implications.

Marketing war: Bush team enlists Madison Avenue in war on terror, by Victoria de Grazia, published in The International Herald Tribune (USA), August 26, 2002, looks critically at the issue of the U.S. trying to create a positive image of itself to others:
<http://www.iht.com/articles/68757.html>

US Plans PR Blitz on Saddam, by Tim Reid, The Times (UK), September 17, 2002. "The Bush Administration is to launch a multimillion-dollar PR blitz against Saddam Hussein, using advertising techniques to persuade crucial target groups that the Iraqi leader must be ousted... The campaign will consist of dossiers of evidence detailing Saddam's breaches of UN resolutions, and will be launched this week at American and foreign audiences, particularly in Arab nations sceptical of US policy in the region. ... The campaign, which will initially receive over \$200 million (£130 million), will be overseen by the Office of Global Communications, whose existence will not be formally announced until next month."

See here also.

Beyond good and evil, by Richard Neville, published in The Age (Australia), April 15, 2002, looks

at some of the U.S. policies and media reporting in the context of the War on Terror:
Patriotism & Censorship: some journalists are silenced, while others seem happy to silence themselves, by Peter Hart and Seth Ackerman, published in Extra! November/December 2001 (a publication from Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting), looks at the issue of media, patriotism, censorship and self censorship in the wake of the "War on Terror".

Why does John Malkovich want to kill me? by Robert Fisk, May 14 2002,

The Independent. This article reflects the various threats Fisk has received for reporting uncomfortable issues, which has increased with the war on terror.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/story.jsp?story=294787>

Selling the War, MoveOn.org

"The reasons for a new attack on Iraq have been presented in a series of press-friendly promotional moments that have been long on promises and short on facts," says MoveOn.org. "Timing has been a critical factor — it is no coincidence, for example, that the climax of the push has come immediately after the anniversary of Sept. 11, despite the fact that there is still no proven link between Iraq and the terrorist attacks of last year." To help counter the Bush administration's planned \$200 million PR blitz, MoveOn.org has produced a useful bulletin explaining the marketing campaign and offering lessons in PR from previous wars.

<http://www.moveon.org/moveonbulletin/bulletin4.html>

The disinformation campaign : Western media follow a depressingly familiar formula when it comes to the preparation of a nation for conflict. Phillip Knightley, October 4, 2001, The Guardian (UK). "The way wars are reported in the western media follows a depressingly predictable pattern: stage one, the crisis; stage two, the demonisation of the enemy's leader; stage three, the demonisation of the enemy as individuals; and stage four, atrocities. At the moment we are at stages two and three..."

Phillip Knightley is author of The First Casualty, a history of war reporting (Prion).